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ABSTRACT

As the need to serve a broader and larger population of students at the community college level increases, the rate of student success is decreasing at many institutions. There is a greater need to deliver in-class and co-curricular experiences that satisfy the students currently entering college. The Student Success Project at Santa Monica College (California) accomplished the integration of such services. Entering freshmen students were provided an extended orientation, developmental and "intrusive" advisement, extra- and co-curricular experiences, peer support and tutoring, faculty training in pedagogy, and collaboration between instructional and counseling faculty. The interventions resulted in significant differences in grade point average, retention, persistence, and overall success rate. These interventions are readily applicable to other community colleges. (Contains 14 references.) (Author)

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Facilitating Student Success for Entering California Community College Students: How One Institution Can Make an Impact

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Abstract

As the need to serve a broader and larger population of students at the community college level increases, the rate of student success is decreasing at many institutions. There is a greater need to deliver in-class and co-curricular experiences that meet the students entering college today. The Student Success Project at a large, urban, diverse community college accomplished integration of such services. Entering freshmen students were provided an extended orientation, developmental, 'intrusive' advisement, extra and co-curricular experiences, peer support and tutoring, faculty training in pedagogy, and collaboration between instructional and counseling faculty. The interventions resulted in significant differences in grade point average, retention, persistence, and overall success rate. The interventions are readily applicable to other community colleges.

Introduction

> "We found that for many Californians the community colleges are the gateway to self-sufficiency and a world class education. But, for too many Californians the colleges are a false hope" (Little Hoover Commission, 2000, p. 1).

California community colleges, and, in particular, the large, urban ones have been concerned about a growing rate of student attrition and general lack of student success (Cohen & Brawer, 2002). In California, where open access to community colleges is available at the lowest cost in the nation (Little Hoover Commission, 2000), there have been increased attendance by those who are from historically under-represented groups, older, employed more hours per week, generally poorer, more likely to attend school at night, first-generation college students, and those who are underprepared for college-level courses (CPEC, 2002) as compared to those who attend four-year colleges and universities and other private institutions. The richness of this population presents both advantages and challenges.

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Serving the broadest population possible of students—especially those who have not been previously well served—is important as the linkage of college attendance and completion has been clearly linked by both short- and long-term earning potential (CPEC, 2002; Pascarella &

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Terenzini, 1991). As the diversity and population size of California and other states increases, there is a need to provide relevant, effective educational experiences for students who may otherwise not attend and successfully complete college (Little Hoover Commission Report, 2000).

There are advantages and disadvantages to serving the broadest possible set of students' needs. The value to all students who are attending college in a more diverse environment is excellent preparation for the world that is reflecting that diversity as well. This breadth of students also presents challenges to success for the college: there are a broader set of needs for students from diverse backgrounds and ages. A greater variety of learning strategies, such as collaborative learning (Bruffee, 1999), or cooperative learning (Hirsch, 2000; Johnson & Johnson, 1998; Slavin, 1994) may be necessary for students' success. In addition, with more first-generation college students attending community college, the process of how to succeed needs to be elaborated with the students in a way that is more in-depth and involved than with students with other resources outside the college setting.

As noted in the Little Hoover Commission's report, *Open Minds and Open Doors* (2000), "19 percent of students who start classes [at California community colleges] do not finish them; 39 percent of the students who take a class one semester do not reenroll in the next" (p. ii). The most recent report on Partnership for Excellence (Chancellor's Office, 2002) further indicates that a 71% successful course completion rate has been reached system-wide. This in actuality suggests that many students in our colleges are likely to be on academic and/or progress probation. While no system-wide reports were found on individual student success, colleges are likely to track this information. For example, as seen in Table 1, the percentage of first-time college students performing below academically accepted standards (i.e., below 2.0 GPA) at Santa Monica College significantly increased from a relatively low 14.8% in spring 1998 to a dramatic 28.2% in Fall 2000 (Tovar & Simon, 2001). It has been suggested that these high probationary rates are the result of students' unrealistic expectations regarding the demands of postsecondary education; the delayed completion of assessment, particularly in reading/writing; delayed or flawed educational planning; and lack of social and academic integration into the college (Tovar & Simon, 2001).

Table 1. First-Time College Students Placed on Probation After Completion of Initial Semester of Enrollment

Probation Type		Spring 99	Fall 99	Spring 00	Fall 00	All Cohorts
Academic Probation	N:	260	851	421	1,246	2,778
	Percentage	16.8%	18.0%	26.8%	28.2%	22.7%
Lack of Progress	N:	190	668	214	486	1,558
	Percentage	12.3%	14.1%	13.6%	11.0%	12.7%
Both	N:	60	226	118	287	691
	Percentage	3.9%	4.8%	7.5%	6.5%	5.6%
Total Students in Cohort		1,547	4,722	1,573	4,412	12,254

Need for Program

The impetus to develop the Student Success Project was a result of the disproportionately high student academic probationary and attrition rate at Santa Monica College. It became clear, that current practices were not sufficiently effective and new strategies were needed. While many ways to address the needs of probationary students, including remediation existed, we elected to design a preventive program working with first-time college students who indicated a goal to transfer to a four-year institution. Based on collaborative efforts with over fifty faculty, administrators, and staff members at the college, the Student Success Project was conceptualized and implemented. The interventions selected were designed to assist students' successful transition into college, and thereby minimizing the probability of probationary status, lack of retention, and attrition. To assess the success of our program, results were compared to a control group and to baseline data.

Method

Participants

The sample for this study was drawn from a pool of first-time freshmen students attending Santa Monica College in fall 2001, who indicated a goal of transfer to a four-year institution. Out of the pool of applicants, 1000 students were invited to participate in an extended college orientation (necessary condition for inclusion in the study group). Of these, 317 students participated in the orientation (described below). An additional 500 randomly selected students were drawn from the same pool and comprised the control group (did not attend extended college orientation). Each of the participants in the study group provided consent for participation and use of their information for this study. As part of our research project, participants attended the extended new student orientation, completed a demographic survey, and the *Career Factors Inventory* (Chartrand & Robbins 1997).

Instrumentation

Demographic Survey. The demographic survey written by the researchers included information such as family-of-origin information (educational and levels of the parents/guardians), distance traveled to school, method of transportation to school, high school grade point average, languages spoken and language(s) spoken in the home, planned number of hours of employment, status with financial aid application, college major and level of decidedness, educational goal, goal commitment level, hours of week intended to be used for studying, participation in college outreach programs, parental expectations, and access to a home computer.

Career Factors Inventory. The *Career Factors Inventory* (CFI) (Chartrand & Robbins, 1997) was used to measure type and level of career indecision. This inventory is a self-scorable and interpretable instrument consisting of 21 items designed to assess an individual's readiness to engage in the career decision-making process. The 21 items load on four factors: Need for

Career Information (six items), Need for Self-Knowledge (four items), Career Choice Anxiety (six items), and Generalized Indecisiveness (five items), upon which four subscales of the same names are based. A discussion of the outcomes for the CFI is beyond the scope of this article, however, these are accessible online (http://homepage.smc.edu/tovar_esau/CFI_CCCCO.html). The CFI has also been validated for use with community college populations (Simon & Tovar, 2003).

Goals, Objectives, and Key Components of the Student Success Project

Goals. The overarching goals of the program were:

1. To increase the success rate and thereby decrease the high rate of academic and progress probation of new students; and
2. To increase retention and persistence rates for these students.

Program Objectives. The objectives for the Student Success Project were as follows:

1. Increase by .4 points, the GPA of students who enrolled in English and math classes where faculty implemented collaborative learning techniques as compared to students in the control group taking these classes.
2. Increase by 25% over a baseline of 48%, the success rate of students in English and math classes compared to the control group.
3. Decrease by 20% by the end of the second year of operation, the probationary rate of program participants compared to a control group.
4. Increase by 15%, the persistence rate (i.e., enroll in the following semester) of program participants who participated in at least two interventions as compared to the control group.
5. Increase the overall success rate of program participants by 20% over the success rate of the control group as a result of all intervention methodologies (e.g., collaboratively taught classes, intrusive counseling, extended orientation, and peer tutoring).

Key Strategies (Interventions). To support the objectives listed above, a set of key interventions were developed, studied, and evaluated. These included:

1. Extended new student orientation for students and "significant others."
2. Use of intrusive/developmental counseling.
3. Provided professional development opportunities to faculty on student pedagogy.
4. Extra and co-curricular activities for program participants.
5. Tutorial support.

Extended Orientation: While Santa Monica College offers a general orientation for new students, the SSP personnel and orientation steering committee believed that it was not adequately addressing the needs of most students. To address this concern, an expanded college

orientation was developed (eight-hour model) by the SSP personnel. The orientation was led by a team of counseling and instructional faculty; available for college credit; was interactive; included social integration cases for discussion and/or "acting" in small groups; provided refreshments; made available campus tours and supported participation in a campus fair; and offered an optional parents/significant other orientation. These components were not available for our more traditional community college orientation (two-hour model).

Intrusive/Developmental Counseling: During the first semester of attendance, all Student Success Project participants developed and filed a student educational plan. This was accomplished mainly through the expanded college orientation. However, extensive follow-up on the part of our counselors and counseling aides was conducted throughout the semester to refine the educational plans and to monitor student performance in their classes. During academic advisement meetings, our counselors engaged students in an ongoing exploration of their academic, career, personal, social, and economic needs. Our counseling services were very much centered on an "intrusive/developmental" intervention model. This allowed us, on many occasions to identify and address a variety of barriers that impacted the success of our students (e.g., mental health issues, extensive personal/family problems, financial concerns, commuting issues) in a proactive fashion.

Professional Development: To ensure that the academic needs of students were being met, math and English faculty and faculty from other disciplines were invited to participate in a faculty development program that focused on teaching instructors use of collaborative learning techniques in the classroom, ongoing assessment of student learning, and on working with first-time students to maximize their success. These faculty members were recruited to teach select classes to SSP students and were paired with a counselor to facilitate communication among them, so that timely referrals and interventions were provided to students experiencing difficulties in their classes.

Extra and Co-curricular Activities: In keeping with Alexander Astin's theory of student involvement (1993) and Vincent Tinto's model of academic and social integration (1993), a number of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities were planned and carried out during the academic year. These activities were linked with material taught in the classroom. For example, in an English class, students read a play and subsequently saw a live performance of it at a theater. Social activities included informal gatherings of students with instructional faculty and/or counseling faculty. Together, all of these activities promoted academic and social integration.

Tutorial Support: Select courses taught for the program were provided with instructional aides or tutors to provide assistance in the learning process. Most tutors were current SMC students who had successfully completed the course for which they were selected to tutor. In most cases, tutors spent part of their hours in the classroom assisting the instructor and co-led group-based activities.

Results

Over the course of the study period, the Student Success Project undertook a variety of activities, which together resulted in participating students being much more successful than students in the control group, and as measured by baseline data. By the conclusion of our first year of operation, we successfully instituted an extended college orientation for new students. We provided professional development opportunities to English, math, and other college faculty on the use of collaborative learning techniques in the classroom; engaged students through intrusive academic advising, academic and social integration-type activities; and provided essential tutorial support to those students in need of assistance.

Effect of SSP Interventions on Student Success

A comprehensive analysis of performance outcomes for program participants revealed that compared to our control group (and baseline data), SSP students were much more successful in various areas. Table 2 presents an overview of these findings. Additionally, results for the effect of each intervention on student success are discussed below.

Table 2. Success Rates for Students Participating in Intervention Strategies

Success Indicator	Intervention* (controlled by activity)								Overall Rate	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Study	Control
GPA	2.73	2.29	2.58	2.22	2.50	2.25	2.59	2.44	2.46	2.35
Units Completed	10.4	8.61	9.9	7.4	9.8	5.6	10.0	10.8	9.3	7.4
Retention (%)	98.8	100	100	98.8	100	97.8	100	100	89.5	84.1
Persistence (%)	84.9	83.3	100	98.8	89.7	60.0	87.7	90.0	79.8	67.2
Academic Probation (%)	15.1	24.0	23.1	33.7	25.4	33.3	23.6	25.7	28.1	34.6
Progress Probation (%)	1.2	10.4	5.4	9.6	5.4	13.3	3.8	1.4	7.8	7.9

*** Legend**

1. Extended College Orientation with college credit
2. Extended College Orientation without college credit
3. Enrollment in collaboratively taught Math
4. Did not enroll in collaboratively taught Math
5. Enrollment in collaboratively taught English
6. Did not enroll in collaboratively taught English
7. Received intensive counseling/monitoring
8. Attended co-curricular or extracurricular academic and social activities

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Grade Point Average. As seen in Table 2, it is evident that SSP students attained higher GPAs than other students, 2.46 vs. 2.35. Most impressive are the GPAs obtained by students in the program who attended the extended orientation and received college credit for it and those meeting with counselors regularly. These students received on average a 2.73 and 2.59 GPA, respectively.

Units Completed. While the average number of units completed by students in the control group was 7.4, those completed by the SSP students were 9.3. Depending on which activities these students participated, they were also more likely to complete a higher number. For example, students who attended the expanded college orientation and received college credit for it, students enrolling in our collaboratively taught math and English classes, students receiving intrusive counseling, and those attending co curricular or extra-curricular activities were more likely complete more units (between 9.8 and 10.8 per semester).

Retention Rate. The retention rate of SSP students was also significantly higher than that of students in our control group, 89.5% vs. 84.1%. Retention rates are significantly higher across the activities in which SSP students participated.

Success Rate. In addition to having completed their coursework with higher grade point averages, participating students also had higher success rates (successfully completing courses with grades of C or better) than control group students and SMC students (college wide). At the inception of the program, the success rate baseline was determined to be 48%. Our research shows that SSP students had a 74% success rate. This represents a 26% increase over that of the 48% baseline.

Probationary Rate. Probationary rates for participating students continue to be of great concern. These rates remain substantially high despite our students having, on average, higher GPAs and success rates than the general student population. However, our analyses suggest that SSP students' probationary rates are significantly lower (28% vs. 35%) than students in the control group.

Persistence Rate. Persistence rates for SSP students were substantially higher than those of students in the control group (79.8% vs. 67.2% for students in the control group and 55% for students college wide). Persistence rates as high as 100% were achieved in the case of students who enrolled in our collaboratively taught developmental math classes and English classes (90%). Thus, our objective on increased student persistence was achieved and surpassed.

Discussion

As discussed above, significant gains in key areas, including students' grade point average, retention, and persistence were made. While improvements to probationary rates were not as extensive, we remain confident that our strategies are proven and readily adaptable. For example, other campus programs at SMC have adopted many of these interventions designed and implemented by this project (e.g., the Latino Center, African American Collegians Center. Student Enhancement and Educational Project, SCORE Program). Our findings on probationary

rates have also allowed us to study, develop, and now pilot succinct counseling-based strategies to help students on probation, including a specialized probationary student "re-orientation." Initial analyses are encouraging.

Given the state of the economy and significant budget reductions facing California community colleges, it is absolutely crucial that proven intervention methods for student success be used in student services. Such has been the case for this project. While the Student Success Project has not been completely institutionalized, we have found it most important to pilot select interventions, make adjustments, test them again, and finally, adopt them. We realize that not every college administration will be as supportive as SMC has been with respect to this project, however, in the interest of increased student success, and in maintaining a watch on cost control, we remain hopeful that projects such as this will continue to be supported.

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